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Anatole France--Philosopher

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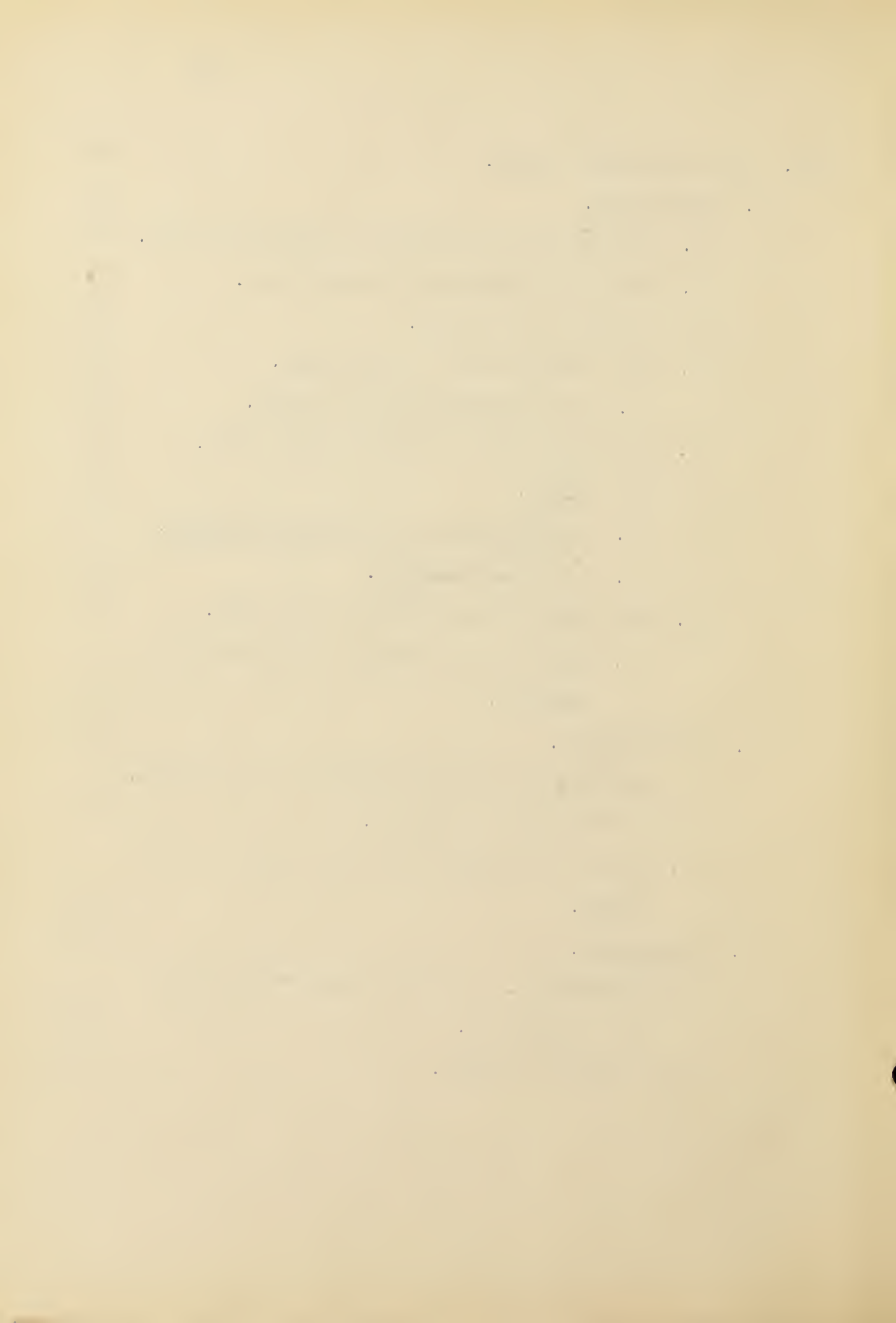
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ANATOLE FRANCE - PHILOSOPHER

I. Biographical sketch.

France, the pen name of Jacques Anatole Thibault, is as famous to literature lovers as is the name of the country from which he came. For more than thirty years, French literature was dominated in the eyes of the world by the fame of Anatole France. "Voici peut-être l'écrivain français qui depuis Renan, a eu le plus d'action, non seulement en France, mais à l'étranger, sur le plus grand nombre d'esprits." No reputation since Voltaire's has been found comparable to his. He ranks high in the world of poetry, literary criticism, and the novel. He is known in the field of drama and is an authority on contemporary history.

In an article which appeared in The Nation of April 27, 1899, Othon Guerlac said, "From this time forth we shall be almost as well acquainted with the France of today as with that of two centuries ago, thanks to the new historian who has just arisen with his three volumes of contemporary history. We do not find in this novelist's historical books either every event in French contemporary history, or an enumeration of every ministry, or recitals of every colonial war; it is nevertheless true that whoever would know the veritable history of France under

the third republic and who would have a precise notion not regarding things and doings of little interest but regarding men who alone signify, cannot dispense with reading and studying these three works of the imagination, which will remain the most precious testimonies and documents of an epoch anything but deficient in literary manifests."

Because of his rather unconventional ideas and views far in advance of his time, he has been most unfairly treated by a number of ultra-conservative critics. Barry Cerf says, "When the definitive biography is written, it will be discovered---- that there was little fine or lovable in his character, that he was not kindly, generous, or even tolerant, that he was an extreme egoist." / His writings would seem to prove that he was a man almost the opposite of the one Cerf has described to us.

"M. France était la distinction voulue et cherchée mais au contraire naturelle, coulant de source et si simple, qu'avec lui on se sentait toujours à l'aise, sauf la moquerie toujours possible et qui quelquefois était impitoyable. Sa simplicité était pleine de charme, de bienveillance, et d'affabilité, sa bonté était inépuisable; tous ceux qui firent appel à lui, n'ont jamais eu à se plaindre de l'accueil qui leur fut réservé." ²

Anatole France was born on April 16, 1844, at Number 5, Quai Voltaire, and spent most of his childhood there. Like the

¹ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 19

² Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 120

majority of the inhabitants of the Quai Voltaire, his father was a bookseller. The literary environment played no small part in the life of the young Anatole. He was educated at the Collège Stanislas and started to write at a rather early age. He contributed weekly articles to the Univers Illustré and for his own amusement, he wrote Les Poèmes dorés. In 1879, he published his first volume of stories, Jocaste et le chat maigre. This book was followed in 1881 by Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard, which has been one of his most widely-read and popular works.

When he was introduced to Madame Armand de Caillavet in 1883, he was thirty-nine years old, but he had so far written little. Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard was his only book to have attracted attention. It has been generally agreed that the influence exercised by Madame de Caillavet over Anatole France was so great that it and it alone brought his latent genius to flower.

It was a long time before Madame was able to overcome the distrust inspired by France's character, but in the end she was disarmed by his marvelous intelligence and became his life-long friend. She had a host of acquaintances and her receptions were attended by the leading figures of literature and politics. In fact she had perhaps the most influential salon in Paris at that time. Each day she invented a thousand gracious ways of renewing and freshening praise. She drew to him new friends and admirers from everywhere. By nature Anatole France was lazy and

had no desire to write. Madame de Caillavet labored for his fame and forced him out of his inertia into composition. She spent long hours in libraries even when traveling for the unique purpose of finding something that might awaken the curiosity of her friend. In the dedication of one of his books, he wrote that without her help, he should have written no books. She labored not in vain. In 1895 he was an officer in the Legion of Honor and in 1896, he was elected to the French Academy. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1921.

For forty years he poured out a series of lively, solid, graceful, and profound works. Of these, some of the well-known books are Thaïs, Le Lys rouge, L'Île des Pingouins, and Les Dieux ont soif. His philosophy developed during the course of his career. Until 1900 he was skeptic. As Voltaire's spiritual son, he delighted in the play of ideas and observed without pity the silliness of men. He probed the past and the present.

Although they are novels, most of his books contain philosophy, sociology, and history as well. Sex, hunger, vanity, and prejudice also play important roles even when men are hypnotized by ideas of Reason, Justice, and Virtue as in Les Dieux ont soif.

Besides being in debt to his immediate predecessors, he owed much to old French romances, to memoirs, and to chronicles. He read and remembered much, but what he borrowed, he made his own. He was a deep admirer of classicism, and many of his works contained essentials of Greek and Latin wisdom. In spite of his

revolutionary and socialistic ideas, he was the delight of the elite. They relished his exquisite style, his rich allusive humor, and his love of literary traditions.

With his passing at Tours on October 13, 1924, France lost its greatest writer since Voltaire.

"Si donc on jette un regard d'ensemble sur la vie du grand maître, on peut y découvrir trois périodes assez nettes; jusqu'en 1879, c'est le panthéisme évolutionniste qui domine en lui; de 1879 à 1892, c'est le scepticisme; enfin depuis 1892, c'est la critique pessimiste et socialiste, aggravée en 1895 lors de l'affaire Dreyfus. En réalité le fond de sa pensée a constamment présenté les mêmes caractères, mais toujours l'une ou l'autre de ses idées a dominé les autres, au gré des circonstances, et la division que nous venons d'esquisser est beaucoup plus superficielle que réelle. C'est ce qui explique comment ce sceptique est devenu homme de parti; ce contemplatif, homme d'action; cet humoriste indulgent, pamphlétaire ricanneur et révolutionnaire audacieux."'

II. Influence of environment upon his philosophy.

A. Father's adulation of Chateaubriand.

Of course the young France was influenced by the ideas of his father, "ancien garde du corps de Charles X, sceptique et désabusé." The father was a great admirer of Chateaubriand and practiced the latter's pompous style even in his daily life un-

der the most unsuitable conditions. The young France began to feel that his father understood him very little and he soon grew to hate Chateaubriand who was responsible for his father's dogmatic, declamatory, emphatic turn of mind. Father and son seem to have been united only by their devotion to books. On several occasions he had declared that he disagreed with his father on all matters of opinion. He felt himself much closer to the sound common sense of his mother, and was keenly delighted when she, with unexpected darts of wit, which were really worthy of Voltaire, was able to prick the bombastic bubbles of the father. "My father was grandiloquent and bombastic; my mother on the contrary was simplicity itself. It is from her that I got my style. She is excellent in telling stories.----- My mother was not highly educated. She read little but her cookery book and her prayer book but she had inherited from her parents a wonderful number of rustic sayings which she threw like flowers into the conversation."

In those books which are really his autobiography, France stated, "My father used to say, 'That child needs waking up.'"²

"I passed for being slow and lazy. The fact is that my mind was always working. I was never inactive for a minute. I read all the books in the shop--good, bad, pious, profane. It was real suffering to me to be dragged out of my contemplative

¹ Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 166

² Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 107

life. I was extremely awkward and shy."

B. Mother's religious influence.

1. Love of mysticism in the Catholic Church.

He had loved religion for the beauty and sensuous appeal of its service, and for its cult of pity and sorrow; but already in his earliest days, he had begun to distrust its praise of suffering, and to recognize in its prohibitions an irksome obstacle to individual freedom.

Although he disclaimed any connection with dogmatic creeds (for this man seemed remote from all dogmatism), France was intensely religious.

"Ma mère était pieuse. Sa piété--comme elle aimable et sérieuse--me touchait beaucoup. Ma mère me lisait souvent la 'Vie des Saints' que j'écoutais avec délice et qui remplissait mon âme de surprise et d'amour."²

2. Beginning of skepticism.

The attempts of young France to follow too literally in the footsteps of some of these saints is in no small way responsible for his skepticism. His endeavor to imitate the saints by wearing a hair shirt resulted in his receiving a scolding from his mother and in his father's doubts as to the sanity of the boy. His religion was soon irretrievably lost--even the flimsy religiosity which he had received from his mother.

¹Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 183

²Le Livre de Mon Ami p. 60

France told us how he studied at home first with his mother and later with a governess whose beauty he admired from a remote corner of the room, but from whom he learned very little. He was later entered as a day student at a boys' boarding school. At lunch time at this school "a pupil droned out of some devotional book, Rollin's Lives of the Saints, for instance. Only what is eaten with pleasure is well digested. My belief is that this pious stuff swallowed with the messes given us contributed not a little to make me a skeptic."¹

As a boy at school, his interest must of necessity center on books as he seemed unfitted for a more active kind of life. "At school I was known for my awkwardness. I couldn't throw a ball or even a marble, or spread a hand of cards properly. Recreation seemed more tiring to me than school. I hated motion and noise, and loved silent solitude. As for my performances in the gymnasium, they were a scandal."²

C. Influence of Life at Collège Stanislas.

"Mais c'est surtout au collège Stanislas que l'esprit de M. Anatole France se développa. Cet établissement religieux fit naître en lui des sentiments contraires entre lesquels son âme hésita sans cesse jusqu'à ce que l'affaire Dreyfus le fît résolument pour l'anticléricalisme et l'antichristianisme."³

"Le contact que M. France a pris avec le culte et le clergé

¹Brousseau Anatole France Himself p. 185

²Brousseau Anatole France Abroad p. 175

³Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 7

et d'autre part les études classiques qu'il a faites sont probablement les deux éléments qui ont déterminé avec le plus de force ses théories sociales et ils datent tous deux de son séjour au collège Stanislas."¹

France was an apostle of Latinism. Although ultramodern in many other respects, he was a champion of Latin education. He persisted in believing in a classical heaven, where it would have been good to live, although he was aware that, due to glaring social inequalities, life in ancient Rome was not all bliss. He liked the Latin language because he thought it more concise and expressive than the modern tongue as well as the nearest approach to perfection.

He developed an intense love for Racine and was ready to take the side of his idol in any argument against Corneille or any other classicist. "J'avais pris aux poètes dès le collège un goût que j'ai heureusement gardé. À dix-sept ans j'adorais Virgile et je le comprenais presque aussi bien que si mes professeurs ne me l'avaient pas expliqué."²

D. Association with book shop.

Anatole France's ideas were always characterized by his doubts and by his rather unconventional beliefs. It would be strange, indeed, if the son of a bookseller did not undergo a great influence because of his associations with the classical and more recent masters and with the patrons of the bookshop.

¹Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 8

²Le Livre de Mon Ami p. 175

It is quite probable that the spirit of contradiction which remained always a prominent trait in France's character was roused by the conversations which he heard in his father's shop and started him on the path to anti-Catholicism and communism. We may quote him as saying, "Woe to the man who does not contradict himself at least once a day."¹ During his whole life he always passed from pole to pole, never taking up the mean position, and with him violent action invariably provoked violent reaction.

His close association with books gave him every opportunity to develop his hobby. "To live with a hobby apart from one's own century, in another age, to know hardly anything about one's contemporaries, but to be intimate and familiar with Cicero, Corneille, or Mme. de Sévigné. That was what fame seemed to me." Later, he said to his secretary Brousson, "Today, my son, fame lies in being able to do what I like."²

"Sans doute une partie des idées qu'il a exposées lui ont été inspirées par des souvenirs d'enfance, par des observations personnelles ou par les voyages qu'il a faits. Mais il a obéi surtout à des influences livresques; le temps qu'il a passé dans sa bibliothèque n'a pas été perdu."³

1. Ancient philosophy.

a. Epicurus and others.

The great influences in his life can be divided into three

¹Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 143

²Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 108

³Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 30

principal groups--ancient philosophy, the eighteenth century, and modern science.

It is through men of letters and the ancient poets that he knew the thoughts of the philosophers. The most ancient writings to which he referred are the Iliad and the Odyssey. He drew from these not only a love for Greek genius and a taste for Greek poetry, but also information about primitive economy. He frequently made allusions to Homer. Among the Greeks, we must mention Hippocrates as a great inspiration to France who spoke of him in this way: "Ce mal (l'épilepsie) est nommé divin; mais toutes les maladies sont divines et nous viennent des dieux." In passing we should refer to Aesop for his freedom of spirit. However, it was chiefly Epicurus and his disciples who were an inexhaustible source of information for our author: all the heroes of his works are epicurean.

For France, only one man dominated humanity--Epicurus. It was from the philosophy of the latter that he received his essential ideas of religion, of virtue, of posterity, and also his skepticism and sensualism. All his works are so completely permeated with the philosophy of his ideal that one can cite on almost every page "une réminiscence épicurienne."

His sensualism began to manifest itself in his youth and he felt an irresistible repugnance towards all austere philosophies:

'Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 30

towards Christianity which scorns the body; towards "Rousseauism" which, because it persuades man of his natural goodness, tends to exercise a moral restraint on his acts; and towards stoicism which vaunts suffering. According to him, "Rousseau n'est qu'un laquais vicieux. S'il n'avait pas si bien écrit, il eût été sans influence."¹

2. Eighteenth century.

a. Rousseau.

However, he willingly accepted one side of Rousseauism; confidence in the superiority of instinct, the senses, sentiment, emotion--the superiority of all these to reason, reflection, intelligence. In Thaïs he wrote, "Oh my Thaïs, let us taste of life! We shall have lived much if we have felt much. There is no other intelligence than that of the senses: to love is to understand."²

Instinct alone is reliable according to him. "Reason, proud reason is capricious and cruel. The holy ingenuity of instinct never deceives. In instinct is the only truth, the only certainty that humanity can ever grasp in this life of illusions, wherein three-quarters of our ills come from thought."³

"'Ignorance is the necessary condition not only of our happiness but of our very existence,' while thought and knowledge

¹ Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 249

² Thaïs p. 125

³ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 59

bring only misery."

"It is not by reflection and by intelligence but by feeling that the highest and purest truths are attained."

b. Voltaire.

The influence of Voltaire is manifested in practically all the writings of France. "Le ton enjoué de l'abbé Jérôme Coignard est celui du patriarche de Ferney; les personnages des deux maîtres de l'ironie ont entre eux un air de ressemblance familiale très net: faut-il énumérer tous ceux de Crainquebille, Putois, Riquet et plusieurs autres récits profitables, et ceux de la Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque? Si la similitude des oeuvres des deux patriarches se bornait au style et aux héros, elle ne serait déjà pas négligeable; mais le Voltaire de notre siècle a emprunté à son ancêtre une quantité si considérable d'idées et de sentiments que c'est là le grand lien qui les unit."

His Vie de Jeanne d'Arc is entirely inspired by Voltaire's conception, and he lets that be clearly understood. In his opinion, the article in the Dictionnaire philosophique, which is dedicated to the heroine of Orleans, gives in three pages, more solid truths and more generous thoughts than certain lengthy works in which Voltaire is insulted in strong language. He borrowed from the great Voltaire an idea which he frequently repeated; it

¹ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 60

² Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 61

³ Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 35

is that the religion of everyone depends on the education which he has received.

3. Modern science.

- a. Darwin.
- b. Taine.
- c. Renan.

Just before and after the war of 1870, like most young men of his generation, he felt powerfully the new hope and enthusiasm of the early followers of Darwin. He made a religion of science and acknowledged Darwin, Taine, and Renan as its prophets. There was even a moment when he was a Positivist.

"C'est la Science moderne; non seulement elle a provoqué dans son imagination plusieurs visions de l'avenir par le développement du machinisme dont elle fut la cause première et qui ne pouvait manquer de frapper son esprit; mais de plus elle est à la base des écrits de tous les philosophes du dix-neuvième siècle où M. Bergeret a pu recueillir des idées de toutes sortes. Ainsi l'on peut dire que la Science moderne a exercé une grande influence sur les théories de M. Anatole France soit directement soit par l'intermédiaire des écrivains du dix-neuvième siècle." "Un homme est venu qui a affranchi l'homme des vaines terreurs; c'était Darwin."²

La Science "nous fait rougir de honte et de confusion au

¹Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 38

²Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 38

souvenir du temps ou nous nous croyions le centre du monde et le plus bel ouvrage de Dieu, nous qui, en réalité tournons gauchement autour d'une médiocre étoile, un million de fois plus petite que Sirius." ¹ Again he shows us that he is far from having absolute confidence in science. "Je suis sûr de très peu de choses en ce monde." ² "Rien n'est en soi honnête ni honteux, juste ni injuste, agréable ni pénible, bon ni mauvais. C'est l'opinion qui donne les qualités aux choses comme le sel donne la saveur aux mets." ³

Evolution was for him a religion. We can now find rather marked traces of his confidence in science and especially in biology. He even showed an excessive materialism at certain moments. "'La vertu' dit-il 'est un produit comme le phosphore et le vitriol. L'héroïsme et la sainteté sont l'effet d'une congestion du cerveau. La paralysie générale fait seule les grands hommes.'" ⁴

To the young men of his generation, it was a fresh, firmly founded revolutionary gospel. As the century wore on, the scientific millennium receded into the infinitely remote future, and to believe in it demanded an extreme exercise of faith.

Just before the Dreyfus Affair, his confidence in science had almost completely left him. In one of his books he wrote,

- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------|
| ¹ Gaffiot | <u>Théories Sociales</u> | <u>d'Anatole France</u> | p. 26 |
| ² Gaffiot | <u>Théories Sociales</u> | <u>d'Anatole France</u> | p. 26 |
| ³ Gaffiot | <u>Théories Sociales</u> | <u>d'Anatole France</u> | p. 26 |
| ⁴ Gaffiot | <u>Théories Sociales</u> | <u>d'Anatole France</u> | p. 9 |

"C'est la Science et la civilisation qui ont créé le mal moral avec le mal physique." ¹ "Peut-être la Science est-elle possible, mais l'homme ne la connaît pas. 'La Science est infallible, mais les savants se trompent toujours.'" ²

With Taine whose historical theory is found again in La Vie littéraire and whose general philosophy appears in certain passages of the same work, we enter the nineteenth century. The principal master of M. Anatole France at that time was unquestionably Ernest Renan, "le suave docteur," "le plus sage des hommes," whose influence was such that his pupil admits to us that he was called mademoiselle Renan. By 1890 he had published Thaïs, a novel inspired entirely by him.

In speaking of the old age of Renan, he said, "J'ai bien connu Renan. Sa vieillesse fut agréable comédie. Dans le monde entouré de jolies femmes, écroulé dans un fauteuil, il ressemblait à un prophète de l'Ancien Testament qui sur ses vieux jours serait devenu polisson et libidineux." ³ France followed the footsteps of his master in his search for pleasure and after the death of Renan in 1892, he became known as "le prince des dilettautes."

Thus the philosophy of the "grand maître" is an amalgam of the theories of Epicurus, of Voltaire, of Darwin, of Renan--in

¹Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 18

²Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 25

³Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 75

fact, of all the great thinkers of all times. Moreover, he readily appropriated the ideas which he borrowed when they conformed to his general philosophy and presented them under a new form.

E. War of 1870.

The war of 1870 had practically the same effect on France's views as it did on the beliefs of the other writers of his day. It gave him a keen dislike for war, but he soon forgot this in his interest in science which so quickly gave way to disbelief. No doubt his loss of faith and pessimism at this time laid a foundation for his cynicism and utter lack of patriotism during a war which was soon to come. He was of the opinion that war at such a point in our civilization was nothing more than a hereditary disease, a reversion to the unmorality of the fratricidal savage. He believed that the simpler and clearer the aim of warfare, the more despicable and disgusting it was. He could, however, see a reason for civil war.

F. The Dreyfus Affair.

In 1889 a new period began. Anatole France had been mildly skeptical and ironical in relation to all secular thought as well as in the matter of religion. In this year his warfare with the autocratic Brunetière commenced, and gradually from now to the end of his life, he became more aggressively skeptical, more

frankly irreligious, more acridly ironical. The Dreyfus Affair of 1897 merely rendered conspicuous--to France himself as well as to the rest of the world--a development which had been taking place in him and which was destined to continue. After 1897 he became militantly anti-clerical and socialistic. He devoted large portions of several of his books to a discussion of the Dreyfus Affair. In the several volumes of his Histoire contemporaine, he mentioned this affair, but in L'Anneau d'améthyste, he discussed the affair at length. M. Bergeret, a noted "Dreyfusard," in the crisis of national dementia through which the chauvinism and anti-Semitism had compelled France to pass for eighteen months, gives his opinions. He has introduced a new character, no other than Esternazy, whose portrait is so well drawn that everybody recognized the "uhlan national" as he was called in France. This ironical literature is disintegrating and anarchistic and from it escapes a perverse and disturbing odor of decadence. He preserved the same tone in L'Île des Pingouins of which he devoted a large proportion to the tale of the "Pyrot Affair" as it was called in that satirical history of France. In his disenchantment, France poured the same sarcasm on his own friends as on his adversaries. France told the story at great length and Zola, Picquart, and Clemenceau, the scholars and intellectuals who fought for Dreyfus, were all gently satirized for their vanity. It was said that Anatole France accom-

plished more with his weak hands by writing his signature at the bottom of a document in favor of Dreyfus than hundreds of thousands of laborers did with their strong hands.

III. His philosophy itself.

And now we get to the real philosophy of our writer himself. Many critics deny him the title of philosopher and even that of a great thinker merely because he created no system of his own. He hated dogmatism and so offered no new theories. We might apply to him what he himself said of Hugo, "Victor Hugo, moins qu'un autre, ne peut fournir matière à une doctrine et donner les lignes d'un système politique et social. Sa pensée, à la fois éclatante et fameuse, abondante, contradictoire, énorme et vague comme la pensée des foules, fut celle de tout son siècle, dont il était, il l'a dit lui-même, un écho sonore."

His philosophy can be given in three words: sensualism, pessimism, skepticism. Sensualism is the basis of it all, but its limits are determined by pessimism so well that we must examine first in what the philosophy of the great "romancier" is pessimistic, then in what it is sensualistic and finally what part skepticism occupied in this ensemble of ideas which were so often contradictory. His philosophy of life is that of the voluptuary and the aesthete--and sometimes of the aesthete alone.

Barry Cerf, who seems extremely bitter towards France has

'Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 13

said, "France declares that he never built up a philosophical system, but he is over-modest. He had, despite all his protestations, a philosophy of life. It was, negatively, the denial of the validity of all philosophies of life; and positively, a frank hedonism."¹

A. Skepticism.

Whatever his philosophy was, it is bitter and gentle, indulgent and ruthless, full of contradiction--for are not life and the human soul full of contradiction--and above all kindly. The drift of his conclusions is this: "We can know nothing of that which we would know, everything deceives us; Nature mocks cruelly at our weakness and ignorance. Life is an evil dream since we know not the aim of life. We possess reason and sentiment. Reason with an open mind and we shall be lead inevitably to doubt. Let us then doubt all things. It matters not whether we live and move in a world of realities or of mere appearance and illusion; appearance suffices for us to perform our part of loving and suffering which is part of life."²

His novels are, on the whole, only philosophical dialogues linked together by indolent intrigues, at least in the majority of cases.

1. "L'Apôtre de la Science" invaded by doubt.

¹Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 143

²Quarterly Review 1900 p. 440

When he published his first book Jocaste, we find rather marked traces of his confidence in science, especially in biology, but even in this book, we begin to notice an undercurrent of something akin to skepticism. At this time, too, instead of being a follower of Auguste Comte and his theory of positivism, he recognized its limits. He who under the influence of Taine, Renan, and others, had been the "apôtre de la Science," was invaded by doubt, and now his "panthéisme évolutionniste" was giving way to skepticism. He denied everything even remotely connected with science. For him there was no exact science and as a result, he felt that one should show himself tolerant of any scientific theories since no one was sure of anything.

If by a skeptic is meant a philosopher who doubts what he does not know to be true, and what he has no reason whatever to believe, who mocks at fatal prejudices, makes fun of swollen reputations, and lashes stupid and cruel ambitions, then assuredly, Anatole France was the prince of skeptics. But it is just the contrary of the truth to say that he was indifferent to all things. He prided himself on his lack of faith. "Skeptic! Skeptic! It is true they will call me a skeptic. And for them that is the worst insult. But for me it is the finest praise. A Skeptic! Why, that is what all the masters of French thought they have been. Rabelais, Molière, Voltaire, Renan--Skeptics. All the loftiest minds of our race were skeptics, all those whom

I tremblingly venerate, and whose most humble pupil I am."¹ But the poor skeptics are really too greatly misunderstood. As a matter of fact, they are the most idealistic of mortals, but they are disappointed idealists.

A great disgust for the world seized him at this time (the time of the publishing of *Jocaste*), and he became visibly a pessimist. "Les hommes valent mieux que la nature. C'est là une vérité consolante et pleine de douceur, que je ne me laisserai jamais de répéter."² "La terre, devenue moins qu'un atome, serait arrosée de la même quantité de larmes et de sang qui l'abreuve aujourd'hui."³ This distrust of nature had probably entered into his philosophy when he was a small child. "Tout enfant que j'étais, et parce que j'étais un pauvre enfant, cette perfide instabilité diminua beaucoup la confiance et l'amitié que m'inspirait la nature."⁴ Because he believed that nature would be as cruel on all other planets, he said at one time, "Ce monde-ci me gâte par avance tous les autres."⁵

"When you want to make men good and wise, free, moderate, generous, you are lead inevitably to the desire of killing them all."⁶

¹Gsell Opinions of Anatole France p. 76

²Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 17

³Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 17

⁴Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 17

⁵Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 17

⁶Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 69

2. Denial of everything supernatural.

From the time France was very young and listened to his mother read from Lives of the Saints, he was somewhat of a skeptic in regard to his religion. When he attempted to follow examples set by the saints and he was punished, his childish mind began to wonder at this strange order of things. At first he went to church regularly with his mother and was entranced by the mystery of the service. It has often been asserted that he always rigorously separated religion and the church, viewing the former with tenderness and reserving his hostility for the latter. He soon began to have doubts about a religion which extolled suffering. Even in his idea of Utopia, he realized that suffering was a necessary part of our existence. He felt that there could be no happiness without it. However, he did not believe that suffering should hold such an important place in life as it did in that of Christ. Soon he felt that the Christian religion was extremely narrow.

But what dominates everything and explains best the political opinions of France is a profound and definitive horror of the Church and of Christianity. He was anticlerical and extremely antireligious. He detested the Church, priests, monks, and almost everything and every one having anything to do with the faith. He knew the Church. He talked about it with a perfect understanding and a great calmness even, but his hostility was definitive, his antipathy absolute and irremediable.

"We know," said France, "that every religion is intolerant and cruel."

"Le 'Christianisme a été contraire à l'art, en ce qu'il n'a pas favorisé l'étude du nu' et les préoccupations d'ordre artistique dominant l'oeuvre et la pensée de M. Anatole France."² At times he said that Christianity did more for love than anything had up to that time, because it made a sin of love. Later he ceased to go to church at all except upon occasion to study the architecture of the church or to listen to some part of the service which particularly appealed to him.

He renounced all belief in a hereafter. Few men of the last two generations have set more seriously to work than he to extinguish the fires of our faith both in God and in man. He lived for the present only and felt that with death came the end of all existence. "L'immortalité de l'âme, que j'ai démontrée avec éloquence, est principalement une nécessité morale. Car la vertu est un beau sujet de rhétorique et si l'âme n'est pas immortelle, la vertu ne sera pas récompensée."³ France adds further, "La récompense des bonnes actions, c'est de les avoir faites, et aucun prix digne de la vertu ne se trouve hors d'elle-même."⁴

"L'avenir, mais il n'y a pas d'avenir, il n'y a rien. Ça

¹ Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 250

² Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 84

³ Jardin d'Epicure p. 189

⁴ Jardin d'Epicure p. 189



recommencera toujours pareil, on construira, on démolira et ainsi de suite. Les hommes ne pouvant pas sortir d'eux-mêmes ni se libérer de leurs passions, rien ne changera. Il y aura des périodes plus calmes d'autres plus agitées, les hommes se tueront toujours, après il recommenceront à faire des affaires."

In his old age he even denied the existence of Christ and encouraged some of his friends to give proofs of this. "Le Saint-Esprit n'inspire pas les gens intelligents."² "La légende est plus forte que l'histoire. Au reste, les hommes ne tolèrent la vérité que lorsqu'elle cadre avec leurs désirs."³

"In all the world the unhappiest creature is man. It is said: 'Man is the lord of creation.' Man is the lord of suffering, my friend. There is no clearer proof of the non-existence of God than life."⁴ "There is not in all the universe a creature more unhappy than I. People think me happy. I have never been happy for one day, not for a single hour."⁵ "I have never lost a keen Catholic sensibility. I dislike seeing angels and saints and bones of martyrs and virgins in the hands of the merchants of the temple."⁶

"Tout d'abord il est clair que Jéhovah n'est pas Dieu, mais qu'il est un grand Démon, puisqu'il a créé ce monde."⁷

¹Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 256

²Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 249

³Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 249

⁴Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 70

⁵Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 71

⁶Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 79

⁷Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque p. 67

"Dieu n'a point d'entendement. Car étant infini, que pourrait-il bien entendre? Il ne crée point, car il ignore le temps et l'espace, conditions nécessaires à toute construction. Moïse était trop bon philosophe pour enseigner que le monde a été créé par Dieu. Il tenait Jéhovah pour ce qu'il est en réalité, c'est à dire pour un puissant Démon, et s'il faut le nommer, pour le Démon. Or donc, quand Jéhovah créa l'homme, il lui donna la connaissance du monde visible, et du monde invisible."

As we have seen, his belief in God passed early. "The very first article of the ten commandments makes me jib: 'Thou shalt have none other gods but Me.' No! All the gods, all the temples, all the goddesses."² He embraced new religions, but they too, one by one, proved empty, because, with the rest of the world, he asked of them something other than what they had to give. He tried Darwinism, Renan's religion of science, Taine's determinism, Claude Bernard's experimental philosophy, all science, including the science of history, all philosophy, including the rationalism of the eighteenth century.

A writer, Huymans by name, while on his death-bed, said to France's secretary Brousson, "He (France) is a great writer but he lacks one necessary thing: faith. Yet he was brought up piously, I have heard, by Christian parents. But vanity, the thirst for applause, the love of paradox--in fact, he is

¹ Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque pp. 67 & 68

² Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 58

in a parlous state."

"Doubt," France said, "is a faculty which is rare among men; only very few spirits possess within themselves its germ, which does not develop without cultivation. It is singular, exquisite, philosophic, immoral, transcendent, monstrous, full of malignity, injurious to persons and property, contrary to the polity of the states and to the prosperity of empires, fatal to humanity, destructive of the gods, a horror to heaven and earth."² France's skepticism was an extreme form of modern skepticism; it was a defiance hurled at the forces which guide the universal, divine, natural, and human--a defiance in which are mingled disappointment, pique, and a dash of bravado.

3. Adoption of atheism.

It seems to be a necessity that everyone have some kind of religion. France, when the last vestige of faith in the Christian religion had left him, declared that it took more courage to be an atheist than to believe in a hereafter. "Son scepticisme était total et n'exceptait rien. Le monde et les hommes lui paraissaient toujours semblables dans tous les temps sans changement, ni modifications d'aucune sorte, et se résoudre éternellement en méchanceté, en hypocrisie, et en tueries. Ce scepticisme avait tout détruit en lui, sauf l'intelligence qui subsistait seule légère, et profonde, compréhensive toujours, vivante et créatrice. Il l'exerçait sur tout et dans tous les

¹Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 99

²Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 123

domaines; les résultats qu'il en tirait se traduisaient en un mépris général, universel et définitif. Sa bonté--car il était bon---son obligeance--car il était obligeant,--se ressentaient de ce mépris." ¹ He had become a pagan, a lover of beauty,--the beauty of women and the beauty of art, especially the art of the ancient world. He greatly admired the beauty of natural or artistic forms or of such superior intelligence as was shown by Greek and Latin writers. The Maître believed in antiquity and in his mission as an apostle of that saturation with beauty which only few men ever attained. He would have liked to wander all over the globe preaching the gospel of a new faith which makes the believer good without the imposition of moral compulsion and the fear of post-mortem punishment. He was a believer in spontaneous morality, inborn, to a certain extent, if proper care is taken and proper environment provided.

"For my part," said France, "if I were called upon to choose between beauty and truth, I should not hesitate. I should cling to beauty, certain that it carries in itself a higher and more profound truth than truth itself. I will even say that there is no other truth on this earth but the beautiful." ²

4. The inconsistency of his views.

His skepticism influenced his life quite as much as it did his literary compositions. Its greatest consequence was

¹ Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 201

² Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 100

that it absolutely prevented him from deciding upon one course of action and following it out to the end. He continually had doubts as to the outcome of whatever he started. Although he had been a life-long admirer of the Greeks, he never learned from them the great, homely lesson they can teach: "mesure," moderation. He was always extravagant: extravagantly skeptical; extravagantly the pure artist, impressionist, dilettante; and later alternately extravagantly socialistic and extravagantly cynical. The significant inconsistency is to be found in the duality of the man since the Dreyfus Affair: he is now an idealist, now a scoffer at idealism. Before 1897 those who did not agree with him were imbeciles; after 1897 a large section of the former imbeciles became to him luminaries.

a. His susceptibility to ideas.

There was real confusion in his political attitude--not merely a successive shifting from one party to another, but a shifting back and forth. He was at times a socialist, and at times a communist; at times he flirted with the anarchists; and at times he attacked all radical parties. He even went so far as to boast about his inconsistency.

Barry Cerf was extremely cruel when he said, "He was always timid, never sure of himself, always a follower; the current of the time made him a dilettante and a skeptic and transformed

gradually the harmless sensualist of the Noces Corinthiennes and the soft sentimentalist of Sylvestre Bonnard, who was ready to see all the world through rose-colored glasses, into the cynical and scabrous chronicler of the Îles des Pingouins, the Dieux ont soif, and the Révolte des anges, an artist who has lost his urbanity and moderation, and is finally bereft of all sense of ordinary good taste."¹

France admits his own timidity. "My timidity is of a different kind--it is congenital, to a certain extent, like genius and sin. It was accelerated in its growth by an incident in my childhood which has increased my conviction that, in our innermost soul, we are always alone."² "I was not quite eight years of age and yet I knew that I could not expose my sentiments to others."³ "We cannot make ourselves understood by one another. We are always alone, but most so when we suffer and when in doubt."⁴

5. His skepticism as found in his works.

a. Thaïs.

France's philosophy may be gleaned from his story Thaïs. This is perhaps one of his most popular stories, due perhaps to the fact that it has been made into an opera. Although a bit subtle, his skepticism can be followed. Thaïs deals with the

¹Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 136
²Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 128
³Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 132
⁴Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 222

"melancholy sunset of Paganism and the troubled moonrise of Christianity." No one has written about that age with more understanding, for France has "une âme riche et complètement humaine-----païenne et chrétienne à la fois." Thaïs is the story of a conversion in the early Christian times. The contrast between the end of Paganism and the beginning of Christianity, between the skeptical and brilliant world of Alexandria and the savage life of the Anchorites is drawn with extraordinary art. "There is not one breath of genuine holiness in the book. Yet for piquancy of attack, for malicious insight into the psychology of the Anchorite, and for sheer brilliancy of representation, there is nothing like this in English."'

After we have thought over the story carefully, we realize why Paphnuce renounced his soul for the charms of Thaïs. It was merely because he had lived too long for things of the spirit and had tired of this life. Thaïs, on the other hand, became tired of her life of sin and abandoned it because of her disgust and her fear of death.

Thaïs is a long satire against asceticism, the cause of all sorts of evils; martyrs whom France reproached for their absence of irony, displeased him because they manifested a sensualism different from his.

b. La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque.

' Sherman On Contemporary Literature p. 175

From the last words of the Abbé Coignard to his faithful disciple Jacques Tournebroche, we have an example of France's attitude by which the Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque is permeated. From the philosophy expounded in this masterpiece in which he proves the inanity of human existence, the stupidity of man, the ludicrous futility of every endeavor to render life on this planet anything better than a tragic absurdity, readers might infer that France was a bitter, misanthropic recluse, bristling with scorn and hatred of life, and burning with a desire to escape from it as soon as possible. Such was not the case: in spite of his contempt for man and his affairs, and his unhappiness on this planet, he loved life intensely.

"As for me," he said, "I love life, the life of this earth, life as it is, this 'chienne de vie.' I love it brutal, vile, and gross. I love it sordid, unclean, decayed; I love it stupid, half-witted and cruel; I love it in its obscenity, in its ignominy, in its infamy, with its impunity, its hideousness, and its squalor, its corruption, and its stench. Feeling that it is escaping and fleeing from me, I tremble like a coward and become mad with despair."

In La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque the skepticism is less subtle than in Thaïs. The Abbé Jérôme Coignard was a rogue, an extremely learned scholar and a devout priest; a great sensualist--he did not allow his vocation to interfere with his



worldly pleasures. He was therefore excommunicated. Not only was he thoroughly versed in the classics; he knew French philosophy as well. He kept his religion and philosophy in watertight compartments and advised his pupil Jacques Tournebroche to do the same. "Jacques Tournebroche, mon fils," he said, "qu'il vous souvienne qu'un bon esprit repousse tout ce qui est contraire à la raison, hors en matière de foi où il convient de croire aveuglement." Theology was well-known to him and his discourse could at times rival that of a saint in piety and sanctity. L'Abbé Coignard was fatally wounded while trying to escape with some diamonds after he had indulged in a drunken brawl and had killed a man. However, he repented in time, and, according to the author, died absolved from his sins. As he passed to his reward, he was considerably consoled by the thought that like Christ, he had died as a result of injuries which had been inflicted by a Jew.

c. Île des Pingouins.

The great stylist and foremost man of letters of France was never more himself, never more witty, humorous, more exquisite than in his burlesque history of France brought down to his own day. L'Île des Pingouins was the talk of all literary and intellectual France and the sensational success of the season. The admirers of France compared his satire with the mas-

' Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque p. 105



terpieces of Rabelais, Voltaire, and Swift. He wrote as a philosopher who saw all human weaknesses, but who had no essential quarrel with humanity.

The preface of the book tells that the author, before writing the book, went to consult an ancient historian. According to France's satire, the French are metamorphosed penguins. Many centuries ago, St. Maël, a Christian missionary, led from his path by the devil, struck an island inhabited by these curious birds. He mistook them for a rather diminutive race of human beings, preached the gospel to them, found them acquiescent, and finally baptized them all. When this mistake became known to the shades in Paradise, a great debate was held to decide what further should be done. All proposals were finally discarded in favor of the most benign--and St. Maël received authority to transform them into human beings. When the saint had first come to the island, there had been only birds on it; hence he saw no signs of murder, rape, or war. But once the birds were turned into men, Penguin Island became as other places. The Penguins became men, clothed themselves, enclosed land, and straightway began to fight. One knocked his neighbor senseless with a club, another bit the nose off his conquered enemy, and still another crushed the head of a woman under a stone. One inhabitant explained to St. Maël that all these actions were necessary, for thus law was created, property found-

ed, and the principles of society established.

The most cynical part of this and perhaps of all the works of Anatole France is his vision of the future in the "Temps modernes." There is no hope in socialism. Wealth will always tend to be more and more centralized. But at certain periods when the capitalists have made life too intolerable for the lower classes, they will rise against them and lay waste the great cities destroying a civilization. For a time all will be barren and desolate, and then humanity will struggle upward again. Once again, as before, a few will control the greater part of the riches and many will suffer from dire poverty. The buildings will rise higher and higher only to be destroyed again as before. Each revolution will be more disastrous than the one previous and finally the entire human race will be effaced from the globe.

c. His skepticism as shown in his life.

a. Skepticism necessary for good citizenship.

I have shown that France was proud of his skepticism. He believed that skepticism was necessary to good citizenship.

"Il n'y a qu'un sceptique pour être toujours moral et bon citoyen. Un sceptique ne se révolte jamais contre les lois, car il n'a pas espéré qu'on pût en faire de bonnes." ¹ "Le scepticisme devient ainsi une qualité presque nécessaire pour un bon citoyen." ²

¹ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. iii

² Gaffiot Théories Sociales d'Anatole France p. 27

France always felt that the church and state should be separated. Hatred of intriguing priests filled his entire life. The Dreyfus Affair made it evident to him that the church was a direct menace to the vast number of citizens who cherished the privilege of living according to their own individual lights. After 1897 his hatred of the church was more conscious and more reasoned. He was tender to Longuemarre, the priest of Les Dieux ont soif, because this priest was simple-minded; he respected Lantaigne, the erudite ecclesiastic of L'Anneau d'améthyste who was buried in theological studies. Neither of these was useful to the "church militant;" neither would be dangerous to the church's enemies. Guitrel, the rival of Lantaigne, was an intriguer, one of those priests who were making the church a formidable political power. France hated him even more than he hated Paphnuce, for the crime of Paphnuce was merely that he impersonated his church's ideal of chastity while Guitrel represented the menace of an ecclesiastical control of all human activities.

B. Dilettantism.

With the creation of Sylvestre Bonnard, France entered into a period of complete dilettantism which Renan had made fashionable, compounded of a mildly ironic skepticism, and an elegant and nonchalant aloofness from the stress of life, and a sympathetic and understanding tolerance of everything, without attaching the slightest importance to anything. He has been a

militant dilettante, and a successful one, like his contemporary, Oscar Wilde. Dilettantism is in its implications the direct denial of humanism, at the root of which is a belief in man and action. He remained a dilettante incapable of real seriousness, constantly playing with his own life and thought, and with the life and thought of others. He hated suffering. He loved ease and luxury. He loved beauty, and he loved above all sensuality--the vulgar sensuality of La Rôtisserie and the "gilded voluptuousness" of Le Lys rouge. Such remained his character until his death. He pursued vigorous studies merely because he was curious to know everything, in order to taste all the enjoyment that is to be found in men, ideas, and things. There is no province of learning which he did not investigate and from which he did not unconsciously derive knowledge and profit. His erudition lends great charm to his works. They are a veritable "pastiche" of all authors, ancient and modern.

1. Decline of intellectualism in his beliefs.

Like most men of his time, France had great faith in science, in intellectualism. Then he began to believe that truth and happiness can be attained only through the senses. This attitude toward the comparative importance of reason and feeling is so consistently held by him that it finds expression in the work of every period of his long life.

"L'ignorance est la condition nécessaire, je ne dis pas du bonheur, mais de l'existence même. Si nous savions tout,

nous ne pourrions pas supporter la vie une heure. Les sentiments qui nous la rendent ou douce, ou du moins tolérable, naissent d'un mensonge et se nourrissent d'illusions."

"La science et l'intelligence sont la source et la fontaine, le puits et la citerne de tous les maux dont souffrent les hommes."² "Mais ce qui afflige, enlaidit et déforme excessivement les hommes, c'est la science, qui les met en rapport avec des objets auxquels ils sont disproportionnés et altère les conditions véritables de leur commerce avec la nature. Elle les excite à comprendre, quand il est évident qu'un animal est fait pour sentir et ne pas comprendre; elle développe le cerveau, qui est un organe inutile, aux dépens des organes utiles, que nous avons en commun avec les bêtes."³

"La science ne fait pas le bonheur, et quand les hommes sauront beaucoup d'histoire et de géographie, ils deviendront tristes."⁴ "Avec la bonne ignorance la foi s'en est allée. Nous n'avons plus d'espérances et nous ne croyons plus à ce qui consolait nos pères. Cela surtout nous est pénible. Car il était doux de croire même à l'enfer."⁵

"We feel that it is no use to know the Certain, which is Nothing. We must strive to know the Impossible, Something. Crushed by the realization of our nothingness, we are tortured

¹ Jardin d'Épicure p. 26

² Jardin d'Épicure p. 226

³ Jardin d'Épicure p. 223

⁴ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 7

⁵ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 8

by infernal suffering. We are impotent in this universe."

"L'intelligence est une calamité, c'est le plus méchant cadeau que le démiurge puisse faire à quiconque arrive sur notre planète. Elle ne sert qu'à nous rendre malheureux, car elle est avant toute compréhension."²

"Je confesserai volontiers que la science n'est qu'inquiétude et que trouble et que l'ignorance, au contraire, a des douceurs non pareilles."³ "C'est la pensée qui conduit le monde. Les idées de la veille font les moeurs du lendemain."⁴ "Nous ne connaissons qu'une réalité: la pensée. C'est elle qui crée le monde. Et si elle n'avait pas pesé et nommé Sirius, Sirius n'existerait pas."⁵ "Je songeai que la plus grande vertu de l'homme est peut-être la curiosité."⁶ And France certainly developed and satisfied his own curiosity along sensual lines.

In spite of his cry for curiosity, France had none towards the literary movements of his own time. He did not understand them and made no effort to become acquainted with them. Like many persons who are ignorant of a movement, he became antagonistic towards most movements of the latter part of the nineteenth century. He fought all the artistic movements of the last half of the nineteenth century which were not of the past, but of the present, and promised to be of the future, as every

¹ Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 222

² Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 128

³ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 68

⁴ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 69

⁵ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 215

⁶ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 77

reader of the Vie Littéraire knows well. He was hostile to the doctrines and the works of the symbolists, naturalists, decadents, impressionists. In his attitude to literature he was not merely conservative; he was positively reactionary.

"I am nearer to a poor savage than to a decadent. I cannot conceive what impressionism is. Symbolism astounds me.---- Naturalism fell immediately into the ignoble. Having descended to the lowest degree of platitude and vulgarity, barren of all intellectual and plastic beauty, ugly and stupid, it disgusted all refined readers.'" ¹

He was a traditionalist because of his ardent and lasting love for the art of the past, because of his timidity and lack of independence, his natural indolence, and his fear that anything new would disturb the "easy existence and liberty" so dear to a dilettante.

Then again his inconsistency: "L'art n'a pas la vérité pour objet. Il faut demander la vérité aux sciences parce qu'elle est leur objet; il ne faut pas la demander à la littérature, qui n'a et ne peut avoir d'objet que le beau." ²

"Quand on lit un livre, on le lit comme on veut, on en lit ou plutôt on y lit ce qu'on veut. Le livre laisse tout à faire à l'imagination." ³

¹ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 159

² Jardin d'Épicure p. 31

³ Jardin d'Épicure p. 33

"Les vérités scientifiques ne sont pas sympathiques au vulgaire. Les peuples vivent de mythologie. Il ne leur en faut pas beaucoup; et quelques simples mensonges suffisent à dorer des millions d'existences. Bref, la vérité n'a point de prise sur les hommes. Et il serait fâcheux qu'elle en eut, car elle est contraire à leur génie comme à leurs intérêts."¹

"I cannot repeat often enough that every art requires great knowledge. Lack of knowledge makes us trivial, sometimes even vicious. The kindness of a man with a narrow horizon has no value."² When France made this statement, he no doubt had in mind the damage wrought by Monsieur Sixte, the philosopher in Paul Bourget's Disciple. "Le trouble moral de M. Sixte nous enseigne du moins que l'intelligence ne suffit pas seule à comprendre l'univers et que la raison ne peut méconnaître impunément les raisons du coeur."³

"Tous les progrès accomplis dans l'ordre de la science et de la matière ne donneront jamais à l'humanité une civilisation supérieure."⁴ "Aussi je serais bien désolé d'être ce qu'on appelle un homme intelligent. J'aime mieux être un imbécile et penser ce que je pense, croire ce que je crois."⁵

2. Confidence in instinct.

Another example of his inconsistency was that France, the

¹ L'Anneau d'Améthyste p. 199

² Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 261

³ La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 64

⁴ Anatole France à la Béchellerie p. 71

⁵ Monsieur Bergeret à Paris p. 365

classicist, the one Frenchman who perhaps was more thoroughly steeped in the classics than any of his contemporaries, should have abandoned the dominating influence of the classical period--Reason. He was always completely engulfed by his emotions.

"Thinking is a great infirmity. God preserve you from it, Tournebroche, my son, as He has preserved His greatest saints and the souls which cherishing them with predilection, He reserves from glory eternal."¹

France agreed with Rousseau on the point that Instinct plays a most important part in the life of man and also in art. "En art comme en amour, l'instinct suffit, et la science n'y porte qu'une lumière importune. Bien que la beauté relève de la géométrie, c'est par le sentiment seul qu'il est possible d'en saisir les formes délicates."²

"Instinct alone is reliable. 'Reason, proud reason, is capricious and cruel. The holy ingenuity of instinct never deceives. In instinct is the only truth, the only certainty that humanity can ever grasp in this life of illusions wherein three-quarters of our ills come from thought.' France teaches us that as a matter of fact we are guided always by instinct and never by deceptive thought: 'We may safely say that anything can be demonstrated by reason except that which we feel to be true,---- Men must have some inkling of this great truth since they never

¹ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p.239

² Jardin d'Epicure p. 58

govern themselves by their reason. Instinct and sentiment lead them. They obey their passions: love, hatred, and especially salutary fear.'

'One can live without thinking. In fact that's how we live ordinarily.-----People live by acts and not by ideas.'

'Intelligence has far less dominion over the instincts and natural sensations than we are inclined to believe, even in men of great intellectual power, for they are selfish, av-
aricious, and sensual like the rest of us.----So slight are our reactions against our reflex movements that I dare not say there is an intellectual state in human society as opposed to the natural state.-----In the darkness in which we exist--all of us--the learned man is beating his head against the wall while the ignoramus remains quietly in the middle of his room.'

'Ignorance has sweetness incomparable.' 'We have eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge and there remains in our mouths a taste of ashes.' 'By the sadness of desolation one must pay for the pride of having thought.' 'The truths discovered by the intelligence remain sterile.-----It is by feeling that the seed of good is sown in the world. Reason has no such power.-----To serve man, one must cast aside all reason as encumbering baggage, and rise on the wings of enthusiasm. If you reason, you will never fly.'"' According to our philosopher, then, Reason is not only profitless but harmful. Moreover, the few

times that he indulged in this classical pastime, this exercise of intellect resulted in wretchedness for him. "Ignorance and error are necessary to life like bread and water. Intelligence must be excessively rare and feeble to remain harmless."¹

3. Absence of seriousness and reason in his ideas.

Because he was a dilettante and continually played with ideas, France frequently voiced new lines of thought. Although he was inconsistent, we persist in taking seriously all that he said. He protested vigorously against our seriousness while he toyed with ideas and scoffed at reason and intellect. "The systems built up by philosophers," he said, "are nothing but tales invented to amuse the eternal childhood of man."²

C. Sensualism.

Sensuality is so clearly the essential element in France's being that it determines the character of his art and the nature of his thought. Critics agree in ascribing to him what may seem to be a dubious and uncertain gift: "voluptuous intelligence."

1. Sensuality, the only virtue which Humanity recognizes.

Anatole France loved life even in its brutality, its sordidness, and its stupidity. He loved it for the beauty which exists in spite of all the world's grossness. "The sense of the beautiful guides me," he says. He loved it especially for its

¹ Pierre Nozière pp. 160-161

² Thaïs p. 55

sensuality. Sensuality dominates the personality of Anatole France as it pervades his work. "Desire has been my guide throughout all my life; I love to desire; of desire I love both the joys and the sufferings. I have always believed that the only reasonable thing is to seek pleasure; I have loved life for its own sake, I have loved it without veils, in its nakedness, now terrible, now charming. Poverty preserves for those she loves the only true possession in the world, the gift which makes beings and things beautiful, which scatters its charm and its perfumes on nature--Desire." ¹

The intimate relation between the sense of beauty and sensuality has always been recognized. As a result of this, ages which have been fearful of the dangers of sensuality have felt that beauty should be distrusted, and if possible banished. The pagan world accepted them both but Christianity denounced both. It is no longer permissible to denounce sensuality without qualification. Today we have returned more or less to the ideas of the pagans. France allots to sensuality a great responsibility for human activities in case of ordinary individuals. In the case of geniuses, the importance of sensualism, according to him, is greater still. He is quoted as saying in regard to Rodin: "I cannot reproach him with his eroticism, for I know well that sensuality makes up three-fourths of the genius of great artists." ²

¹Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 39

²Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 46

His "intelligence voluptueuse," which was a consolation to him, was employed mostly for his own satisfaction rather than for the world at large. Sensuality, in his eyes, was the source of all virtues or of the only virtue which he recognized--humanity. In the opinions of many critics, voluptuousness was the essential element of the philosophy of the great France. From beginning to end, his work is devoted to desire and voluptuousness in varying shades--here delicate, there cynical, here soothing, there aggressive.

His sensuality, which was at first innocent because it was natural and was the product of an instinctive response to emotional stimulation and "poetic impressionability," became conscious and defiant in the presence of a bitterly hostile state of civilization.

"I'm looking for beauty in man and nature. I am inclined to call beauty, truth, because the former springs from the latter."¹ "I dare say that outside of beauty there is nothing real in the world."² "It's beauty that teaches us to live."³

"La forme concrète de la Beauté, c'est un beau corps de femme."⁴

"Je dirai que la vie des mortels a deux pôles, la faim et l'amour."⁵

"L'attrait du danger est au fond de toutes les grandes

¹ Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 238

² Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 238

³ Kémeri Rambles with Anatole France p. 238

⁴ Anatole France à la Séchellerie p. 130

⁵ La Rôtisserie de la Reine Pédauque p. 304

passions. Il n'y a pas de volupté sans vertige."'

While we can scarcely admire the sensuality of M. France as it appears in his conception of love, it has another form which is infinitely delightful to us. His sensitiveness to beauty never fails. He appreciates it always, whether it be in women, nature, antiquities, art. This sensitiveness to beauty and the ability to reproduce it in the images that words convey constitute his chief claim to glory. His descriptions express beauty of sight, color, sound, motion--and although his love tales may leave us cold, this appreciation of beauty cannot but awaken in us warmth and feeling and tenderness.

2. Worship of Venus.

France wrote Thaïs to prove that Venus is not dead, that she must be venerated as of old, that she is implacable in pursuit of those who refuse to burn incense at her altar. Paganism in the person of Eicias warned the Christian Paphnuce: "Fear to offend Venus; her vengeance is terrible."² Paphnuce paid little heed to this warning, and we know that Venus punished him. Many people have doubted that the Venus whom France worshiped was the old Roman goddess of pagan days. Love to him seemed to be nothing more than lust. His characters desired to possess and to be possessed, nothing more. Thérèse and Dechar-tre in Le Lys rouge give us his real idea of love, "The love you

¹Jardin d'Épicure p. 18

²Thaïs p. 61

have for me is merely sensual. I do not complain, for it is perhaps the only true love."¹ To this Dechartre replied: "It is also the only great and strong love.-----It is full of senses and images. It is violent and mysterious. It attaches itself to the flesh and to the soul of the flesh. The rest is only illusion and lies."²

Voluptuousness is roused in the characters whom he creates about as easily and indiscriminately as in those who people the work of the naturalists.

France makes this kind of love the end of his existence. He says, "It seems as if all nature has no other aim than to throw beings into each other's arms and to have them enjoy, between one infinite nothingness and another, the momentary intoxication of a kiss."³ "Make love night and day, winter and summer. It is for that you are in the land of the living. All the rest is but vanity, vapor, deception. There is only one learning: love! There is only one riches: love! There is only one politics: love!"⁴

"Love is a jealous God. Cupid won't be fed on sighs and soothing drinks. He who heats the furnace and delays to put in his earthenware risks finding another's pot there."⁵ "Love is a science, the science of sciences. The more you apply yourself to it, the more you excel. The saying, 'The innocent

¹ Le Lys Rouge p. 358

² Le Lys Rouge p. 358

³ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. 347

⁴ Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 44

⁵ Brousson Anatole France Abroad p. 168

have their hands full' is nonsense. The innocent don't know where to put their hands. If they did, would they be innocent?"¹ This last quotation, although rather crude is typical of France. "It is as absurd to be proud of virtue as of one's height or voice, or the color of one's hair or eyes. These are mere accidents in which we are without influence."² "Virtue for the most part is only a form of impotence or anaemia."³

In L'Île des Pingouins with unrestrained mockery he set himself against that Christianity which was opposed to Venus of ancient times. In this book he did not conceal his detestation of the church as the ancient exterminator of all thought, all knowledge, all joy---especially all joy. He imagined Virgil refusing an invitation to enter the paradise of the Christians in these terms: "To fear pleasure and flee from voluptuousness would have seemed to me the most abject outrage that could be inflicted on nature. I am assured that during their life some of the elect of your god abstained from nourishment, and fled from women out of love for privation, and exposed themselves voluntarily to useless suffering. I should fear to meet these criminals, whose frenzy strikes me with horror."⁴

A heroine of Euripides asked, "qu'est-ce que donc qu'aimer?" and France, "le père de Vénus," answered, "Il faudra lui répondre encore avec la vieille Athénienne du poète: 'O ma

¹ Brousson Anatole France Abroad p. 324

² Brousson Anatole France Abroad p. 355

³ Brousson Anatole France Abroad p. 355

⁴ Île des Pingouins p. 150

fille, la chose la plus douce à la fois la plus cruelle.'" ¹

"There are no chaste people. They are hypocrites. They are sick folk. They are eccentrics. They are madmen.---The fact is without sensuality there is no sensibility: no soul. The more passionate we are, the more intelligent we become." ²

"I no longer want other learning than in the realm of love. Love is now my unique, my particular study.-----For me a woman is a book. Remember I told you there are no good books. By dint of seeking through the pages, you end by finding a passage that repays you for your trouble." ³ "The most beautiful subjects? The simplest and the least clad." ⁴ "If I had still the gift of prayer, I would repeat without ceasing: 'Oh, Lord, lead me into temptation.'" ⁵

3. Aversion to all opposed to sensualism.

a. Thais, satire against asceticism.

b. Repugnance towards:

(1) Christianity.

(2) Rousseauism.

(3) Stoicism.

It was really voluptuousness which inspired in M. Anatole France his antipathies and his affections. At first he felt a profound aversion towards everything which was opposed to sensualism. Thais is a long satire against asceticism, which he

¹ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. 311

² Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 86

³ Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 36

⁴ Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 58

⁵ Brousson Anatole France Himself p. 102

considered the cause of all kinds of evils; martyrs, whom he reproached for their lack of irony, displeased him also because they manifested a sensualism different from his. He felt an irresistible repugnance towards all austere philosophies--towards Christianity which scorns the body; towards "Rousseauism" which, because it persuades man of his natural goodness, tends to exercise a moral restraint on their acts; towards stoicism, which vaunts suffering.

4. Sensuality divorced from the sense of beauty.

Love to France was merely a matter of sensuality. The Abbé Coignard, Tournebroche, Choulette are, like the early Penguins, beasts of the field. Their love is anything but beautiful. In the Lys rouge, the Histoire contemporaine, the Histoire comique, it ought to be possible to find love and beauty (a beauty which is not merely superficial) hand in hand, graciously responsive to each other, in conformity with the pagan and with the aesthetic ideal. But one seeks in vain. In Les Dieux ont soif, France describes an artist who engages in a voluptuous adventure in a hay loft, among fleas and filth, without being in the slightest degree repelled by the surroundings nor by the hideousness of his victim. France hated Zola because of his bestiality, but this scene I have just described and several others from France's latest books might easily have been accredited to the detested naturalist.

5. Religion and sensuality.

France discovered and "savored" the sensuality of religion, or more correctly of religiosity in the manner of the Romantic poets. To him religion, like every other human quest, was in reality the fruitless pursuit of happiness by the way of sense. As Paphnuce is departing for the desert, there to resume a life, Nicias, the Epicurean, about to return to his easy pleasures declares that their paths are not dissimilar: "We are acting in obedience to the same sentiment, the sole spring of all human action: each is seeking his form of voluptuousness, with the same end in view: happiness, impossible happiness."¹

The voluptuousness of religious emotion is a frequently recurring theme in his novels and in the Vie littéraire. "The hymns sung by the Christians expressed the delights of suffering, and mingled in a triumphal dirge so much joy and so much suffering that Thaïs, as she listened to them, felt the voluptuousness of life and the horror of death flow at the same time through her reawakened sense."²

With France the idea is that the voluptuousness of religious emotion is associated with the "charms of sin, the grandeur of sacrilege," and compounded of the "voluptuousness of life and the horror of death." "Passion makes its delight of anguish and of disquietude. Even religions have been unable

¹ Thaïs p. 239

² Thaïs p. 128

to withstand it; they have done nothing but offer it an additional voluptuousness: the voluptuousness of remorse."¹ France is therefore attracted to Christianity by hysterical religious ecstasy, and by the added voluptuous charm which religion gives to sinful love by solemnly forbidding it.

There is little satisfactory evidence that France himself ever experienced any real religious feeling. He was attracted by the aesthetic charm of Christianity, by the sensuality he discovered in its cult of sorrow, and by the added voluptuousness which it lent sin by condemning it. He was thus drawn to religion; but he was repelled much more emphatically, for, despite all his efforts to make it the ally of sensuality, he found it to be the uncompromising enemy of all voluptuaries. He rebelled against Christianity finally because it forbids human joys. "God," he concluded finally, "is envious, stupid, wicked, an enemy of joy and love."²

D. Irony.

1. Humor and wit in his early works.

The French view of life is critical, realistic, unsentimental. Frenchmen have always been considered inveterate mockers. The French have produced a type of satire whose peculiar mark is irony. When the Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard appeared in 1881, it contained a type of humor so strange to the French

¹ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. 346

² Les Dieux Ont Soif p. 278

that it almost had the appearance of a new "genre." Sylvestre Bonnard overflows with the indulgent benignity of a lover of humanity such as Terence; it is suffused with kindly wit, and derides man and makes sport of life with all the benevolence of an Epicurean like Horace who is satisfied with his lot.----- The victim of the humorous sallies of the book is usually the diarist himself. Only rarely outside of his autobiographical works does France make use of this sentimentality. As he developed, he deserted "the glowing indulgent humor" of Sylvestre Bonnard with its tender sympathy for all things human and entrusts himself to the type of satire whose characteristic is not humor but irony.

If Anatole France had not written this little volume (Sylvestre Bonnard), if he had not been himself (at times) Sylvestre Bonnard, the love he has inspired among readers of books would have been sadly diminished. Here indeed is the France of the world's devotion; here is the gentle ironist; here is the tender critic of human frailty (not stupidity or wickedness) who spreads the gospel of tender tolerance (not contempt) and banishes hatred. "Sylvestre Bonnard seems to me to be the source of what I have called the legend of France's tender pity and gentle irony."

Very soon there appeared the biting type of irony which was to become the distinctive trait of the author's manner.

' Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 186

Thaïs is perhaps the best known of the author's numerous ironic demonstrations of the insufficiency of religion in its contest with sensuality. Its subject and style are redolent of medieval works of edification; and its intention is quite the reverse. The story of the courtesan is the triumph of the spirit over the flesh, but this victory is on the whole insignificant in comparison with the triumph of the flesh over the spirit in the person of Paphnuce. And the sting of irony lies precisely in the fact that the author may turn upon his accusers with the retort that surely there is nothing more accordant with the doctrines of Holy Church than the salvation of Mary Magdalen and the damnation of an ascetic who falls from grace.

His irony, it must be added, is not directed by any means exclusively to the derision of religion. Its objects include as well all the secular activities and ideals of man, the power and beneficence of thought in particular. Addressing his disciples through the lips of the Abbé Coignard, France artfully disparages the claims of reason and religion at the same time.

"Plus je songe à la vie humaine, plus je crois qu'il faut lui donner pour témoins, et pour juges l'Ironie et la Pitié, comme les Égyptiens appelaient sur leur mort la déesse Isis et la déesse Nephtys. L'Ironie et la Pitié sont deux bonnes conseillères; l'une en souriant nous rend la vie aimable; l'autre qui pleure, nous la rend sacrée. L'Ironie que j'invoque n'est

point cruelle. Elle ne raille ni l'amour, ni la beauté. Elle est douce et bienveillante. Son rire calme la colère, et c'est elle qui nous enseigne à nous moquer des méchants et des sots, que nous pouvions, sans elle, avoir la faiblesse de haïr."¹
 "Sans l'ironie le monde serait comme une forêt sans oiseaux; l'ironie c'est la gaieté de la réflexion et la joie de la sagesse."²

2. Excessive use of irony.

It is characteristic of France that his heroes are frequently so many mouthpieces of his criticism of life; and that his subsidiary personages are the result of his humorous and tender and ironical contemplation of men and their manners.

The very nature of irony requires that it be employed economically; the slightest excess causes one to rise in defense of the victim. The primary law of satire is that it must tell the truth. France has attacked all the beliefs, all the codes, all the conventions and usages, all the habits of mind of his day and ours; and it cannot be contended that there is not some truth in all that he says. In his most recent books France has passed beyond the pale of satire into the use of invective and much of our sympathy has gone to the victim. Irony has become so dominating a quality of France's manner that it absorbs the reader's attention to the virtual exclusion of all else.

¹ Jardin d'Épicure p. 94

² La Vie Littéraire v. 3 p. 32

3. Effect of ironic manner upon his thought.

Jules Lemaitre tells us that the fairy Irony visited Renan one day and said to him: "I bring thee a charming gift; but I bring it thee in such abundance that it will encroach upon the domain of all thine other gifts, and warp them. Thou wilt be loved; but no one will ever dare to tell thee his love, for people will always fear to seem fools in thine eyes. Thou wilt make sport of men, of the universe, and of God; thou wilt make sport of thyself, and in the end thou wilt lose all concern for the truth, all taste for it. Thou wilt mingle irony with the gravest thoughts, with the most natural actions, and the best; and irony will render all that thou dost write infinitely seductive, but unsubstantial and fragile." ' Although this opinion is extremely harsh, it really sums up France as well as and even better than the great Renan.

The irony which the skeptics, poor disappointed idealists, use is merely an expression of their discouragement. They laugh, but their gaiety always conceals a terrible bitterness. They laugh in order not to weep.

E. Pity.

1. His sympathy for humanity.

a. His view of suffering.

Perhaps the most marked quality of France's manner is his pity. In spite of the fact that France hated Christianity be-

' Cerf Degeneration of a Great Artist p. 248

cause it seemed to him to extol suffering, he felt that suffering was necessary to happiness. "La souffrance! quelle divine méconnue! Nous lui devons tout ce qu'il y a de bon en nous, tout ce qui donne du prix à la vie; nous lui devons la pitié, nous lui devons le courage, nous lui devons toutes les vertus."¹ "Le mal est nécessaire. Il a comme le bien sa source profonde dans la nature et l'un ne saurait être tari sans l'autre. Nous ne sommes heureux que parce que nous sommes malheureux."² "Le mal est la raison d'être du bien et le bien est la raison d'être de l'homme."³

"Au milieu de l'éternelle illusion qui nous enveloppe, une seule chose est certaine, c'est la souffrance. Elle est la pierre angulaire de la vie. C'est sur elle que l'humanité est fondée comme sur un roc inébranlable. Hors d'elle, tout est incertitude. Elle est l'unique témoignage d'une réalité qui nous échappe. Nous savons que nous souffrons et nous ne savons pas autre chose."⁴

"C'est grace au mal et à la souffrance que la terre peut être habitée et que la vie vaut la peine d'être vécue. Aussi ne faut-il pas trop se plaindre du diable. C'est un grand artiste et un grand savant; il a fabriqué pour le moins la moitié du monde."⁵ "Le mal est indispensable au bien et le diable né-

¹ Jardin d'Épicure p. 43

² Monsieur Bergeret à Paris p. 248

³ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. 334

⁴ La Vie Littéraire v. 1 p. 335

⁵ Jardin d'Épicure p. 69

cessaire à la beauté morale du monde."

b. His view of pity.

He offers suffering as the only excuse for having pity. "Que serait la pitié sans la douleur?" "C'est par la pitié qu'on demeure vraiment homme. Ne nous changeons pas en pierre comme les grands impies des vieux mythes. Ayons pitié des faibles parce qu'ils souffrent la persécution et des heureux de ce monde parce qu'il est écrit: 'Malheur à vous qui riez!'"²

"Great writers have not mean souls.---They are generous. ---They do not limit their affections. They pity all suffering, and strive to soothe it. They take compassion on the poor players who perform in the comic tragedy, or the tragi-comedy, of destiny. Pity, you see, is the very basis of genius."

IV. Conclusion.

I shall now leave Anatole France who, like the most generous minds of his native land, professed the religion of sincerity, the cult of tolerance and devotion to pity.

¹ Jardin d'Epicure p. 71

² Jardin d'Epicure p. 99

SUMMARY

Anatole France, the great French writer whose works are more widely read today than those of any contemporary writer, was the son of a bookseller. Because of his associations with his father's bookshop, he was greatly influenced by the classical masters and ancient philosophers, particularly Epicurus. France's books are simply permeated by the philosophy of Epicure. He resembled Voltaire and Renan in so many ways that he was known as the Voltaire of his age and also as the prince of dilettantes.

In accordance with the trend of the times, he was extremely pessimistic. He was at heart a skeptic. He soon lost all faith in religion and science and he doubted everything except suffering. He believed that his skepticism was necessary to good citizenship. In spite of his love for classicism, he abandoned the dominating influence of the classical period--Reason. He considered that instinct alone was reliable.

Sensuality dominated the personality of Anatole France as it pervaded his work. He loved life for its sensuality and he was guided by the sense of beauty. He had a strong aversion to everybody and everything opposed to sensuality--to Christianity, to "Rousseauism," to Stoicism. At an early age he had lost all faith in the Christian religion, but he continued to be fascinated by its mysticism and what he believed to be its voluptuousness.

With the appearance of his Sylvestre Bonnard, he brought to the French people a kind of wit which had hitherto been unfamiliar to them but which had been commonly used in England. In his later books he employed the irony which the French recognized and he used it to excess. His manner is distinctive because of his use of irony and also for his pity. He believed that suffering is necessary, for without it, we could not know happiness.

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